

The Silent 7th: An Illustrated History of the 7th Australian Division 1940-46

Mark Johnston

Reviewed by Neil James

Dr Mark Johnston is in charge of the teaching of history at Scotch College in Melbourne. He is also the author of the excellent companion volume, *The Magnificent 9th: An Illustrated History of the 9th Australian Division 1940-46*. This illustrated history of the 7th Division is even better. The photos are well chosen, evocative and blend seamlessly with the accompanying well written summaries of complex operations. The maps, footnoting, indexing and appendices are a credit to the author and publisher. The introduction and its tables explain and summarise the detail that helps the layman enjoy reading military history.

Raised in May 1940 from a brigade in the Middle East and two in Australia, the 7th Division missed out on the campaign in Greece and Crete undertaken by the 6th Division. But one of its brigades helped the 9th Division defend Tobruk during the first phase of the famous siege (April-August 1941). The other two undertook the successful campaign in Lebanon and Syria in June and July.

Following Japan's entry into the war the 7th was recalled home. Arriving in late March 1942 the troops had only a week's home leave each (the least received by the three divisions returning from the Middle East) such were the urgent operational needs of the period. Johnston rightly notes that security considerations also meant no open publicity was given to the division's return. A major aspect of the 7th Division story not covered in the book is the drafts of experienced junior officers and NCO who were stripped from units and rushed to New Guinea to bolster the militia battalions already in theatre. Many of them provided the experienced junior leadership that later stopped the largely inexperienced militia battalions from disintegrating on the Kokoda Track, when under severe pressure from numerically superior Japanese forces, and before the AIF could reinforce them in strength.

Following the Japanese landings at Gona in late July, General MacArthur finally took the decision to commit the 7th to the Papuan campaign in early August. The 18th Brigade arrived at Milne Bay 12-21 August and was in action by 25 August. The 21st Brigade was deployed to reinforce Port Moresby and relieve the battered but heroic 39th (Militia) Battalion on the Kokoda Track. The lead battalion of the 21st was in action at Isavura by the end of August, still largely wearing desert khaki. The 25th Brigade was in Moresby by early September and in action at Imita Ridge by the middle of the month.

The 21st and 25th brigades then had the hard slog of pushing the Japanese back up and over the Owen Stanley range. Then

(assisted by the veteran 16th Brigade from the 6th Division and inexperienced US troops) they had to crush the strongly defended Japanese north Papua beachheads at Gona, Buna and Sanananda. And, as Johnston rightly notes, they had to do it the hard way — without adequate tank support (none at Gona and easily destroyed or disabled 'light' tanks at the other two).

Johnston's coverage of the command controversies of the Papua campaign is necessarily sparse but fair and telling. My only quibble would be his description, "Pott's policy of a delaying retreat was partly vindicated by the decision of the newly arrived Brigadier Porter to continue the withdrawal ...". It was rather an unavoidable and well-executed fighting retreat under exceptionally difficult circumstances. No qualifier to the word vindicated is necessary when referring to the command records of Arnold Potts, and indeed General Tubby Allen.

After rebuilding its strength in Australia in late 1942 and early 1943, the 7th was back in New Guinea in July 1943 and fought in the campaign to recapture Salamaua, the Markham Valley, Lae, the Finisterre range and the Ramu Valley. During February-May 1944 its brigades again returned to Australia to recover.

Johnston ably covers the 'silent 7th' finally receiving the national recognition it deserved for Syria, Papua and New Guinea, after often being eclipsed by the official publicity that accrued to the 6th and 9th Divisions in the Middle East. The comparative lack of publicity largely resulted from a combination of security considerations in early 1942, and Government embarrassment over the political failures that would have resulted in disaster during the Kokoda campaign but for the efforts of the 7th. This recognition included the entire division formally marching through Brisbane in August 1944.

The 7th Division's final campaign began with the amphibious attack at Balikpapan in south-east Borneo on 01 July 1945. This was the last and, to many unnecessary, major allied campaign of the war. After hard fighting the 7th Division's long war came to an end three weeks later. Johnston estimates around 40,000 men served with the division during the war, with casualties totalling 6744 including 2063 dead.

As with its companion volume, this book superbly and sympathetically captures the spirit of the division's men and the era in which they fought. This is as good a general handbook on the campaigns of the 7th Division as you will get. Now Mark has only the 6th Division to go. ♦

Mark Johnston, *'The Silent 7th: An Illustrated History of the 7th Australian Division 1940-46'*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2005, Casebound and jacketed, 272pp., RRP \$49.95.

